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ABSTRACT

For many children, societal changes have restricted the opportunities for and the right to play. Adults deal with these violations of children's right to play by trying to correct problems, preventing future problems, or by denying that problems can or could exist. In order to meet the challenge of preserving children's play rights, we need to be alert to five societal trends: (1) increasingly unsafe neighborhoods, especially evident in the United States, where guns are increasingly available to children who experience and witness violence and whose parents keep them away from playgrounds and neighborhood streets for their protection; (2) family realignment and adjustment, especially an increase of single parent families and families in which both parents work full time and latch-key children are restricted from play for their protection; (3) increased sedentary lifestyle in which television viewing occupies more of children's time than any other single activity and there is increased electronic game and computer activity and decreased playtime; (4) school curricula with less time devoted to play and more time to academic competition and the task orientation of after-school activities; and (5) increasing safety and decreasing play value, the need to strike a balance between meeting safety regulations and providing children with risk-taking and challenging activities. The challenge for adults is to provide children with places to be children and to do childlike things. (KDFB)

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DIMENSIONS OF PLAY: REFLECTIONS AND DIRECTIONS -Closing Keynote
XIII IPA World Conference, Espoo, Finland; August 16, 1996
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

(Personal commentary preceeded the following)

The heart of this conference was it's program of fine speakers, workshops, home groups and informal gatherings of colleagues discussing their thoughts on play issues. The play issues were many, but dialogue associated with societal change seemed to be prevalent throughout the week .... A theme which appeared in the conference's opening commentary by IPA President, Robin Moore-----a theme of `Change`, A `feeling of change `. A Change that is clearly prevalent in the Economy, in Culture, in Family and in Environment.

While childhood has been stable for some children, societal changes have put all to many other children and their play opportunities at risk. Times are indeed changing. Play opportunities are changing, and these changes are restricting children's opportunities, and right, to play in most of our countries.

The conference has certainly provided us with an array of program content. We were delivered the thrill of successful programs and personal interactions with children, families, communities, institutions and political arenas, as well as the agony of realization that our children's right to play has been compromised.....that it is and continues to be violated, in some way, in each of our respective countries.

We have come to realize that violations occurring in one nation's play-yard today can well occur in another nation's play-yard tomorrow. And, we all seem to be at some "Mode" of operation in dealing with these violations. Some of us are in the "*remedial mode*", trying to correct the problems associated with given factors that are inhibiting and destroying the child's opportunities to engage in the joys of play experiences. Others of us are in the "*prevention mode*", knowing what potentially lies ahead....acknowledging what can filter into our society, and taking action to greatly reduce negative impacts on our children's given right for optimal play opportunities. And, a few others of us are spinning in a "*denial mode*", a "hear no evil..see no evil...speak no evil" complex....."It could never happen here; violations of children's play rights doesn't apply to us". I hope they are right.

Whatever "mode" you find yourself in, it is our challenge as a professional organisation to try with all of our energy and talent, in each of our respective nations, to preserve children's play rights. To do this, though, we must be alert to 'societal trends'; trends that are becoming increasingly apparent and troublesome; trends that are inhibiting the Dimensions of Play for our children.

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While I am sure you can list additional trends, I have zeroed in on 5 that reflect presentation commentary during this past week, and ones that I personally feel to be most devastating. See if you can identify with some or all of these trends, and determine whether or not you're in a position to deal with them? And if so, what action can you take to both prevent and remediate?

TREND #1: Increasingly Unsafe Neighbourhoods

So, how safe was your neighbourhood for your play needs when you were a kid growing up? Think about it for a minute. Were there good times? It certainly brings a smile to my face: Playing baseball with an array of neighbourhood friends in empty fields and in the streets in front of our homes; Climbing trees, and building forts and clubhouses; Roaming our neighbourhood freely, unrestricted, without a care or worry. If one of us got hurt during our play, a mother was always around the corner to patch us up. Play was good. Play was everyday. We didn't know it, but play was the very core of our total growth, development and learning.

But now it's 40-some-odd-years later and times have changed. The play opportunities for children now living in my old neighbourhood certainly have changed. And, I'm quite alarmed at what I've seen; and, saddened that most of the play experiences I had as a child will not be available to this generation of children - and, probably not to those of the future. Today, those very carefree play spaces I grew up and roamed in are laden with fear and play restrictions.

In many Neighbourhoods around the world families and their children are trying to cope with an increase in violence. Within their communities, their playgrounds, streets, and even their own backyards are now thought to be too dangerous for children to play. Today violence is no longer considered just an inner city problem, either. The long arms of violence have now reached out to embrace what had been regarded as "safe zones" - the suburbs. Is this, too, happening in your country?

This unfortunate trend seems to be sweeping through many of our homelands, but nowhere is it so vividly apparent as in my home country, the United States. It is indeed a great country to live in. It is still the land of bountiful opportunity. But, it horrifies me to know that the USA is considered the most violent industrialised democracy in the world. Violence is up 57% in the last decade and has replaced jobs and the economy as the most significant problem facing young people today. Over 6,000 school-age children die from homicide or suicide each year. In my country we lose about a classroom of children every 2 and 1/2 days to violent death..... We're talking about an entire generation that's growing up at risk.

The main culprit of this increased violence is Guns! Easy accessibility to guns by our children. I am sorry to report that children in the United States are arming themselves; guns have become an

equaliser. It takes less than one hour for any urban child to gain access to a handgun. Children are being shot at in their neighbourhoods, near their schools, and even in their schools - most often by other children. Some are random "drive-by" shootings. Most, though, are the result of this new way of resolving conflict with peers. "Play-fighting" is being replaced with "play-killing"; a new kind of play - a deadly kind of play.

Recently two New York suburban youths, playing 'cops & robbers' and chasing each other through the neighbourhood, were shot by police who mistook their play guns for real ones. Real looking 'play guns' are being sold in toy store. On the side of responsibility, though, America's largest toy store chain announced it would stop selling real looking weapons. It's a step in the right direction. But, many more steps must be taken, for each day in America13 children die from guns, 30 children are wounded by them, and 5,703 teenagers are victims of violent crimes - and, a gun is usually involved.

The problem extends well beyond the crime itself, though. What about those children that only witness violence? For every youth who is a victim there could be as many as 200 witnesses to the crime itself or the events leading up to it. For example, lets look at 2 violent incidences I'm sure you have read about recently. How many children witnessed the shooting and killing of their 16 classmates and teacher, and wounding of many others, in their primary school gymnasium in Dunblane, Scotland in March? How many pre-schoolers witnessed the machete attack on their playmates at their nurse,y school's garden tea party in Wolverhampton, England in July?

How will these events affect children's play? Not just those who eye-witnessed the tragedies, but also the thousands of children who were exposed to these events through the media and through emotional table conversation at home by anxious parents. To counter their fear of neighbourhood violence, especially in cities, families are taking measures to protect their children. This includes: Keeping them away from conflict areas, such as playgrounds and neighbourhood streets; Keeping them indoors; Keeping them from play.

We certainly can't blame families for wanting to protect their children. But, we can blame a society for allowing neighbourhood violence to reach a level that infringes on something so basic, so natural, and so developmentally important as a child's right to play outside. An American sociologist colleague recently noted: "*I think a long time ago, this society was walking down a path, and came to a folk in the road.....The left path said 'Non-violence' and the right path said 'Violence'.....We started walking down the violent path, and now we're lost in the woods, and can't find our way out*". Which path has your country or city taken? How far along that path have you traveled?

TREND #2: Family Realignment & Adjustment

In many countries there has been a sharp increase in single parent families, as well as in families where both parents work full-time. In both situations an increasing number of children come home from school to an empty house. In the US we call these children "latch-key children". Most often "latch-key children" are confined to their home. Parents basically want to know where their children are and to be self-assured that their children are safe. For parents, safety means having children in the house close to a phone so either one can make quick contact.

While concerns may be real, the absence of a parent or designated care taker after school means that the child's right to play is violated daily."Latch-key children" typically are not allowed to play outside with friends; they typically are not allowed to have friends inside to play; and, the child's closest play companion too often, then, becomes the TV set..... an unregulated companion that too frequently promotes antisocial aggressive, rude and violent behaviour that all too often gets imitated by the young viewer in real life settings. By the time the parent or parents do get home it is usually too dark or too late for outdoor play with friends. Thus, no physical activity; no social activity; no learning through the trials and errors of play experiences.

I must also mention at this time that 1,200,000 latch-key children come home to houses in which there is a gun!

TREND #3: Increased Sedentary Life Style

As I previously mentioned, the TV set is the "latch-key" child's closest play companion. It was found in the USA that TV viewing occupies more of children's time than any other single activity. Depending on age, children in America watch on the average of 23 hours of TV per week. By the time the average child is 12-year-old he or she will have compiled twice as much TV time as classroom time. By the time that 12-year-old reaches the age of 70 that person will have watched the accumulation of 7 years of TV.

Since play is the major occupation of childhood, it hardly requires a team of social scientists to demonstrate that mass TV viewing is bound to make considerable inroads into children's playtime. A few questions must be considered, though: What do children watch during these long hours of viewing? Is it appropriate viewing? Does TV portray life and society's values and morals, or does TV set the standard from which a society models?" What effects do these programs have on the development of our children?.....And, has today's TV programming had any effect on the nature of play, and the type of interactions played out?

It is becoming evident, too, that the vast majority of today's children are succumbing not just to TV viewing, but also to an increased number of hours of electronic game playing and computer

interactions - the latest being "cyberspace"; an "internet" world of information at your fingertips! Unfortunately, this wonderful technology increases, yet again, children's sedentary behaviour and subsequent life-style.

As this trend increases, play among children decreases. Play, as we knew it as children, is becoming a thing of the past. Our traditional games and play rituals are becoming lost to the next generation. Play as a medium for children's growth, development and learning is too often overlooked. Greatly diminished are the developmental implications associated with social interactions with peers, as well as children's physical health and well being.

We may well be raising children who will have much higher health and fitness risks throughout life than past generations. Why are we allowing all this to happen? Have the outcomes been considered? "Sedentary Behaviour" not only decreases our children's outdoor play opportunities that involve physical and social interactions, it greatly increases the probability that they will become sedentary adults and develop serious health problems!

Again I'll use the USA to make my point. 15-20% of American children are now considered fat, and, during the past 25 years obesity has increased 54% among children 6 to 11 years of age. As far as physical strength is concerned, 55% of girls and 25% of boys between 6 and 12 years of age cannot do even one push-up. It has also been found that 50% of American children are not getting enough exercise to develop healthy hearts and lungs, and, 40% of our 5 to 8-year-old children show at least one risk factor for heart disease----high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or, low physical activity. In addition, low physical activity also means children will be more susceptible to serious health problems like hypertension, diabetes, psychological disorders, impaired heart tolerance, as well as other related ailments as children move through adolescence and into adulthood.

Although a complex issue, the answer was implied this week in a number of presentations. There appears to be a simple and logical solution: Increase play opportunities for our children and we will increase their physical activity; Increase their physical activity and we increase physical ability and the health conditions of children.

TREND #4: School Curriculum

I don't know about you, but, school-day activities have certainly changed since I was a child! Most distressing is knowing that children in my country are getting increasingly less time to play during their school day. More and more time is being devoted to academic subjects. For example, in my home state of Alabama, it is required that children adhere to an academic curriculum 6-1/2 out of the 7 hours they are in school each day.

In a paranoia over international academic comparison and competition, all too many school curriculum are now being directed toward normed standardised tests. This pressure has driven school administrators and teachers to eliminate most, or all, activities that are not academically oriented. So, how about you? Are the schools in your country caught up in the paranoia of universal academic competition? Are your schools being driven by test scores? Are schools eliminating or drastically reducing all activities that are deemed non-academic? Have recess or play periods, both indoor and outdoor, become a thing of the past? Has it happened? Will it happen?

If, indeed, this pressure for academic excellence is here to stay, we must strongly acknowledge and support the relationship between cognitive process and physical interaction. We must remember that, in the same way physical exercise shapes the bones, muscles, heart and lungs, it also fuels the brain with a better blood supply; feeds brain cells with a healthier supply of natural substances that enhance their growth; and helps the brain to provide a greater number of connections between its neurones. Through vigorous physical play a brain is better able to process all kinds of information.

I would assume, then, that a good balance between academic subject matter and vigorous play would raise those much sought after test scores! I would also assume that this would influence administrators and teachers in bringing about a better balance of body and mind curriculum. Unfortunately, in academically driven schools, and in those striving to "catch-up" to some mythical international standard, words and research promoting curriculum balance has had little effect.

Meanwhile, this academic emphasis continues to take away children's outdoor as well as indoor play opportunities at an increasing number of primary & elementary schools. Disappearing are morning and afternoon recesses. Disappearing is the lunch-time play period. When I went to school we had a full hour for lunch - plenty of time to both eat lunch and play around with friends. Now, children get 20 minutes or so; barely enough time to eat, let alone time to play & socialize. Disappearing, too, are the customary outdoor childhood games and rituals that had been preserved for decades, past on from older children to younger children - usually during recess time and lunch hours. Thus, we now have greatly diminished opportunities for children to develop and nurture social and physical skills, as well as opportunities to work out emotional responses in a setting with few adult restrictions.

In addition, "after-school agendas" for children are also becoming more task oriented. For example: Tuesday = music lessons; Thursday = boy/girl scouts; Monday/Wednesday/Friday = organised football practice; Saturday = the big game. So, when is there time for what children do best and need the most? When is there time for informal play?

TREND #5: Increasing Safety & Decreasing Play Value

We appear to be in a double bind. There is no argument to the fact that we want to keep our children safe and reduce the number and severity of childhood playground injuries. But, in the process are we taking away "Play Value";....those important characteristics of a playground that draw children to it and entice them to return time and time again. Although playground designs have changed over the years, children and their play needs have not changed. Children have always sought out challenging play experiences and have exhibited risk-taking behaviour. Learning to handle risk is part of a child's natural growth and development; it is part of growing up; it pervades most of our activities throughout life. The need for adventure and exhilaration within the play experience is what extends the play encounter and feeds growth, development and learning.

What has changed over time is the adult's perception of children's play needs and the provision of meaningful playground environments. There are no easy solutions for putting challenge and risk into children's play while striving for maximum injury control. Ultra safe playgrounds may provide peace of mind for adults, but children are likely to reject it and seek challenge and risk somewhere else; often in undesirable places that expose them to potentially serious consequences.

If we are to serve our children by providing optimal play environments we must strike a balance between safety regulations and the implications of challenges that meet children's risk-taking needs. Of course, providing children with challenges and risk-taking elements, void of hazards, is nothing new. In many countries throughout the world, play environment designers have long promoted playgrounds that meet the total needs of all the children who come to use them. A fine example we can always turn to is the "Adventure Playground". But, in some of these countries, like mine, increased liability concern has prompted close attention to regulatory guidelines. As these regulatory systems strive to make playgrounds accident proof, manufactures and independent designers conform to minimise lawsuit possibility should an injury occur.

We have technically done a fine job setting guidelines to make children's playgrounds safer. But, in the process, we have factored out the "play value", especially with regard to challenge needs. To protect the child's play rights, new guidelines factoring in children's developmental needs and play value may be necessary. Maybe we can "strike a happy medium - where risk and challenge aid a child's development, and failure results, at worst, in a case that can be characterised as 'first aid - and a return to play'".

Or, should we take another point of view? Maybe, when all is said and done, we will find that we have simply overextended our welcome as creative playground designers and formal play directors in our schools and communities. Conference colleague and UK play safety specialist Peter Haseltine summed it up rather well recently, indicating that studies have started to question the quality of play experiences offered our children within adult contrived settings, and

that...."*perhaps we should ask whether this is play at all or rather a form of directed activity masquerading as play. The research continues to show the importance of complexity and changeability in the provisions of children's playgrounds and the development of creativity in children, yet practical observation suggests we have failed to learn and profit from this. It continues to be startling how often the research and the children's own choice stresses the importance of the natural environment - and how often its importance is ignored in practice*".

Perhaps the answer here is not so complex after all. Maybe it IS quite simple. With all due respect to our playground manufacturers, and commercial & residential land developers, perhaps it is time to scrap the evolutionary spun playgrounds of the past 100 years, and withdraw plans to level the trees to build yet another shopping mall, and let our children have their land back. Allow them to return to their natural play environment - nature. If we can dedicate wildlife preserves for our birds and animals, why can't we dedicate forests and fields as "natural play preserves" for our children?

Fredrich Froebel, a highly respected early childhood specialist, wrote in 1887 that "children's outdoor playgrounds are nature itself". So, why not let children return to Froebel's nature playground, creating dams, canals and bridges in natural streams; nurturing gardens of flowers, plants and trees; exploring boulders, ridges and tree limbs; raising and caring for animals; running and playing games in open fields. And, of course, in this changing and security conscious society, we will need to provide a few well trained `Forest Play Rangers´ to oversee and to apply that parental "First Aid"as needed.

Children have not changed. They, as we, when we were children, are only looking for the time to play, and for places to climb a tree, to build a fort, to play childhood games, and to just kick-back and watch the clouds roll by. A place to be a child, and to do child like things.